

VZCZCXRO1082  
RR RUEHHM RUEHLN RUEHMA RUEHPB RUEHPOD  
DE RUEHNE #0260/01 0251045  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 251045Z JAN 08  
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0151  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 1426  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 1630  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 2316  
RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHDC  
RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000260

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR OES/PCI, OES/ETC, OES/ENV, AND SCA/INS  
STATE PASS TO NSF FOR INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS  
INTERIOR FOR FRED BAGLEY AND MINI NAGENDRAN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: INDIA WELCOMES INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE AS GHARIAL DEATHS  
CONTINUE

REF: New Delhi 0097

NEW DELHI 00000260 001.2 OF 002

¶1. SUMMARY: ESTHOFF and ESTHFSN met with Dr. R.B. Lal, Inspector General, and Dr. Anmol Kumar, Deputy Inspector General of Wildlife at the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) on January 24, 2008 to discuss the continued die-off of India's gangetic gharial population described in Reftel. In a very candid discussion, both officials did not hesitate to share information regarding the crisis and the GOI's response to it. In addition, they both noted the lack of available expertise within India and welcomed technical assistance from the United States and the international community.  
END SUMMARY

-----  
STILL DYING  
-----

¶2. Dr. Lal stated that the current death toll stood at 87 animals. He noted that the rate of death had slowed somewhat since December 2007 but had not ceased as the latest dead gharials were discovered as recently as January 23. Dr. Kumar confirmed the deaths were still occurring primarily in sub-adults, both male and female, but that the carcass of one adult male had also been recovered. Dr. Lal confirmed the MoEF, in conjunction with state forest departments, had increased patrols on the affected 35 kilometer section of the Chambal River and that he was receiving daily updates on the death toll.

¶3. Dr. Lal confirmed there is still no known cause of the die-off but that the GOI had ruled out earlier claims of possible human intervention by either the sand-mining or fish mafias due to lack of any physical evidence to support the theory. When ESTHOFF noted the speculation regarding the fish and sand-mining mafias had been fueled by the fact the first carcasses found in early December had been buried, Dr. Lal very candidly stated the burials had been done in error by front-line forest personnel who did not know how to handle the situation. He went on to note current speculation involving a parasite found in rotten fish as a potential cause of death was a possibility but that claims contamination from the heavily polluted Yamuna River were more than likely unfounded as the Yamuna joins the Chambal far downstream from the area where the deaths are occurring.

-----  
INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE  
-----

¶4. Dr. Lal confirmed the MoEF not only welcomes international assistance on this issue, but that in conjunction with their gharial crisis partner, WWF-India, have already invited four international experts, including one American, Dr. Brian A. Stacy of the University of Florida, to visit the Chambal River to take part in the investigation. In a previous conversation with WWF-India Secretary General Mr. Ravi Singh, ESTHFSN had learned that the four

SIPDIS

experts are due to meet with the Gharial Crisis Management Group on January 28, 2008 to formulate a plan of action. Drs. Lal and Kumar could not confirm the date but believed the meeting would take place within the next week.

¶5. In addition to the international experts already being assembled, Dr. Lal expressed a need to obtain contacts with information on the Lake Griffin crocodile die-off that occurred in Florida beginning in 1997. He stated the MoEF would greatly appreciate initiating email consultations with a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) crocodile expert who would be willing to offer expertise and share information. He also expressed a desire to engage USFWS in long-term planning in order to avoid any repeat of the current die-off once a cause of death has been established. (Note: Post is currently working with OES to identify a suitable expert at USFWS. End Note)

-----  
COMMENT  
-----

¶6. The MoEF's handling of the Gharial crisis is a refreshing departure from the past when it was unwilling to seek outside assistance such as during the 2005 Tiger crisis. The MoEF of today has not only partnered with an NGO, which is uncommon, but has recognized the limitations of Indian expertise and has sought out international assistance. In an earlier conversation with MoEF Secretary Meena Gupta, ESTHOFF was very impressed with her knowledge

SIPDIS

and evident concern regarding the gharial crisis. Although the conversation was short and took place on the margins of a climate

NEW DELHI 00000260 002.2 OF 002

change meeting, Secretary Gupta informed ESTHOFF she welcomed U.S. assistance and would follow-up by asking her Inspector General to contact him. It was the result of her direct action that led to the January 24 meeting with Drs. Lal and Kumar who themselves were highly engaged with the issue and expressed a strong sense of urgency and commitment which had been lacking at the MoEF in past years. It is too soon to tell whether this level of professionalism and openness will continue but the MoEF's current handling of the gharial crisis bodes well not only for the gharial, but for increasing environmental engagement as well.

MULFORD